

To the greater glory of God: building others up and giving the glory to God

Advent 3

17 December, 2017

Reading: John 1:6-8,19-28

One of my first jobs was working at Housing NZ. I was a loans officer and had the job of helping people get into their first home. At the desk opposite me was a young woman called Lisa. She had a curious Latin phrase stuck to her in-tray: *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. Curious as to what it meant I asked her.

"It means," she said, "to the greater glory of God."

"Why would you put that on your desk?" I asked her.

"It's to remind me that everything I do, I do for the glory of God. Giving loans and helping people" she said, "is for God's glory."

Today we hear again in our Gospel about the ministry of John the baptizer. He is pretty clear about his boundaries. Even though the crowd want him to be, he is clear that he is not messiah, he is not the prophet, he is not Elijah. John had a large following and it would have been easy for him to claim a title. Rather his ministry was to prepare the way for one who was coming, one who was so much greater than John that he said "I'm not worthy even to untie his sandals."

In our world the pressure is that we have to be successful. You, like me, might have been to those parties where the parents or grandparents of children are trying to impress you. It starts simply enough - "My Johnny is good at finger painting at Kindy." Then the next, "My Sarah has been chosen for the CSO." Before you know it someone's kid has discovered a cure for cancer, got a Nobel Peace prize and is married to princess Eugenie. I find this at funerals too. The richer people are, the more they need to impress with their wonderful life, rolling out their many achievements. Why do we do this to ourselves?

On Tuesday night I watched a documentary on J.S. Bach. If anyone had something to crow about it was J.S. Bach, one of the greatest composers of all time. Across 250 years his music has been sung and played and adapted and performed in every corner of the earth. Bach was of course a committed Christian. He saw the gifts that he had as coming from God. He even wrote at the end of all his music 'to the greater glory of God'.

So what can we learn from Lisa and John the baptizer and from Bach. Each of them had a ministry. Lisa's was to help poor people, John's was to be a sign for the one to come, Bach's was to write timeless music. Each ministry was for the building up of others and for the glory of God.

Sometimes Christians suffer from false humility. I'm no good at anything. I can't do that. God has given each of us a ministry to do, and he calls us and equips us for it. Our growth as humans is to grow into that calling. To do this we need to know our boundaries. John wasn't the messiah, Lisa wasn't the manager, Bach didn't paint.

But how are we to discover our calling? Often people ask me, what is God wanting me to do with my life? God is calling each of us, regardless of our age and ability into a ministry. The place to begin is to look at what brings us joy.

As we light the candle of joy today we are reminded that God wants to bring us into a place of joy. Joy is different from happiness. Happiness comes and goes but deep lasting joy is gift from God to us.

The intersection between what brings us joy and the needs of our community - this is the point of our ministry.

Jim was an old retired man I met. He had a passion for model trains. He had a great one at his house. Once, when his granddaughter was sick and needed to go to hospital, he got talking to the nurse. "What would it be like," he said, "if I built a Thomas train that could go around the top of the ward? It would be away from little fingers but big enough for the kids to see."

Today you will find Jim down at the hospital. The Thomas train has become a firm favourite with the kids. The nurses love it because they use it to distract the kids when they are giving them injections, and the parents love it too. Some of them even say to the kids, "Let's go and see Thomas today," rather than "Let's go to hospital."

What is God calling you to? Chances are you are already doing it, but have just never thought of it as a ministry.

In the end anything that meets need and brings us joy can be a ministry, as long as we dedicate it to the greater glory of God.